

One In A Hundred by AlabasterInk

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Adventure, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Bromance, F/M, Gen, Like crushes or admiration, Multi, Mystery, Platonic and Familial bonds are the main focus, The Romance is Very Much on Season 1 level, Will and Eleven Sibling Relationship

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Demogorgon (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Bob Newby, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Lonnie Byers, Martin Brenner & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Martin Brenner & Will Byers, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane & Dustin Henderson & Maxine Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

When Will Byers is kidnapped by the Hawkins Department of Energy he doesn't expect to be turned into a science experiment, explore another dimension, get hunted down by monsters, or meet a girl that puts Jean Grey to shame. Dr. Brenner may not be a Demogorgon, but the secrets of Hawkins Lab are no less terrifying for two kids just trying to survive.

1. The Boy Who Died

Author's Note:

Hello! So this is my first Stranger Things multi-chaptered fic. I'm not sure how long this will take me to finish or what will change when Season 2 comes out, but hopefully it won't take too long (though knowing me that's debatable). Any typos and grammatical errors are accidental, but I don't have anyone to review it so I hope I managed to get them all. I've had this AU in my mind for months and I hope you all like it.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

Enjoy!

November 6, 1982

Hawkins, Indiana

“You sure you don’t want to stay?” Mike Wheeler flicked on the lights above his garage, bathing the darkened driveway in a soft orange glow. Thick snow clouds piled almost unseen above him, only visible by the shaded grey edges blending into the night sky. “My mom said she was gonna pull out the extra blankets. We could build a fort in the basement.”

“I promise not to knock it down this time,” another boy, Dustin, tried to coerce. His missing front teeth made it hard for his tongue to work around the words, creating a prominent lisp.

Lucas, standing closest to the door to keep warm, raised one disbelieving eyebrow in Dustin’s direction. “Really?”

“What? I can do it!”

Lucas crossed his arms and stared.

Their friend, a small lad with hair shaped into an unflattering bowl

cut, clicked the headlight of his bike on and balanced himself atop the seat so as to stay in place. The boy's face scrunched up in apology. "I wish I could, but Mom and Jonathan said they wanted me home before it starts to snow."

"But what if you get caught in the snow on the way there?" Mike reasoned in an attempt to extend their time together. It was rare that their group was allowed to sleep over as none of their parents usually wanted to host all of them for an entire night. "Come on, Will."

Will waffled in his decision, doe-eyes flickering between the pleading faces of his friends. "I-I can't. I'm sorry!" He exclaimed to the simultaneous groans of his friends. "But if I get caught in the snow then you guys can have bragging rights for the rest of the year."

"Just bragging rights?" Lucas questioned, raising his brow again.

Will sighed. "And I'll let you guys have first pick at my comic books."

Now that was tempting. Will's collection wasn't as vast or varied as theirs', but what he did have was an impressive array of first edition comics that his grandfather had gifted him before the man passed away. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin had been itching to get their hands on them for years.

"Deal!" Mike's hand shot out, clasping Will's in his own. Dustin and Lucas immediately joined in, sealing the promise between them.

A second later, Will dislodged from their grasps and positioned one of his feet back on the pedals. "Tell me what you come up with, okay?"

"You got it." Dustin shot him a thumbs up, fingers almost white. He adjusted the baseball cap situated atop his curls and smiled. "I can already taste victory."

"It's a science fair project, not an eating competition," Lucas fired with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh you think you're so smart, don't you, Lucas?"

Will shot Mike a commiserating smile, one only ruined by the sparkle of amusement brought on by Lucas and Dustin's escalating argument.

“Good luck with them.”

“Why are you leaving me again?”

The long-suffering expression that stretched across Mike’s face forced a series of giggles out of Will’s mouth. “Think of it as payback for last week.”

“I was sick!”

“Not my problem,” the smaller boy joked, pushing his bike forward. “Have fun!”

“Will!”

The echoing sound of Will’s laughter carried back to the trio as he curved out of the driveway and away from the cozy warmth of Mike’s house. “See you tomorrow!”

Mike darted forward, hands cupped around his mouth. “I hope you freeze!” He shouted, sharing a grin with the newly distracted Lucas as the umber-toned boy elbowed him playfully in the arm.

They could almost hear the smile in Will’s voice as he shouted back, “I won’t!”

The three boys laughed, but didn’t bother waiting for Will’s bike to disappear before hurriedly heading back into Mike’s basement in an effort to regain feeling in their fingers. At the same time, Will was just reaching the end of Maple Street, hands tightened into fists around the handlebars in order to keep them from freezing.

Ozone tinged the air as the eleven-year-old steered onto the next street. His nose stung from the sharp scent of almost winter and his too-short sleeves displayed an array of goose bumps that no doubt traveled all the way up his arms. A white mist tickled his face with each breath he took and shivers crawled through his body. The ratty backpack he’d had since third grade bounced uncomfortably along his spine.

The darkened streets of Hawkins, Indiana were comfortable in their familiarity. Void of traffic, most people were inside hunkering down

for the impending snowfall that was determined to blanket the small town so early in the season. Will could already feel a few flakes kissing his nose.

He sped up, relishing the burn that spread through his legs as he pushed the bike further. Liquid warmth instantly flooded him and the cold chill of November brushed over his cheeks as a refreshing breeze rather than a teeth-rattling gust. More flakes began to fall as Dustin's house appeared out of the corner of his eye, and he crested over the last hill with a sense of weightless euphoria that left him breathless for one brief exhilarating moment. He zoomed passed the house, feet stilling against the pedals as he allowed gravity to take control. The little trails of light that filtered out from the houses around him flashed like stars going into light speed, but as he turned off Cornwallis and onto Mirkwood Will was forced to adjust to their sudden loss.

Another burst of speed sent the boy zooming passed the wired fence blocking the road from the Hawkins Department of Energy. His feet again stilled along the pedals as his momentum pulled him down the street and further into the woods. The light on his bike was the only source of illumination he had now, but he'd taken this road so many times he almost didn't need it.

Trees lined either side, rife with the sounds of insects and the occasional owl. Will ignored all of these. All he wanted to do was get home before the storm really hit. As much as he was sure his friends wanted to get their grubby hands on his comics, Will really wasn't too keen on getting stuck in the snow with only an old flannel shirt and vest for warmth.

It wasn't like he wouldn't end up sharing them anyway.

The sound of an approaching vehicle sounded out of Will's right ear, and he directed his bike closer to the tree line in an effort to get out of the way. Lights brightened over the eleven-year-old's head, casting his shadow forward. He paid it little mind; it wasn't unusual for cars to travel this way, especially if they contained workers from the Hawkins lab. His bike bumped over a few fallen branches as he maneuvered further off the road, waiting for the vehicle to pass with little concern.

The headlights grew brighter, and Will was forced to squint his eyes in an effort to ward off the discomfort. His bike swiveled as his vision was momentarily blinded. A second later, a van with the Hawkins Electric logo pulled up alongside him. Will expected it to continue on its way, but to the boy's surprise the van slowed down to a crawl as if to travel alongside him.

Confused, but not immediately concerned, Will pulled to a stop, his feet falling flat against the pavement in a jerky movement that had his hand-me-down pants catching against his sneakers.

In the years to come, Will would wonder at what would have happened if he'd just continued along or even abandoned his bike entirely and trekked home through the woods. He couldn't have known then, but it would still be one of those questions he'd ask himself at night when the silence became too much or the darkness too all-encompassing.

His fingers flexed into a tentative grip along the handlebars as the van came to a stop beside him, and Will couldn't prevent himself from inching back. He immediately chastised himself for it; this was *Hawkins* – nothing happened here, and these people worked for the government. They protected people.

The window rolled down, and Will had obviously been watching one too many horror films because it caused something in the boy's stomach to coil into a knot. His bike light hit the van awkwardly, only allowing the lower part of the driver's face to be seen. The man had a particularly bushy mustache and his lips were pulled into a concerned frown. Will's grip relaxed.

"Hey, kid," the man – *Hairy*, Will dubbed in his head – called, "you need a ride?"

Will's first instinct was to say no. His house wasn't far and while the first few flakes of snow were beginning to fall, he was confident he could make it home before he became a human popsicle. On the other hand, he didn't want to sound rude by refusing. These men – the *military* – had pulled over just to check and see if he needed help, when they no doubt had much more important things to do.

He chewed on his lower lip, and hesitantly shook his head. “N-no thanks. My house isn’t far.”

“You sure?” Hairy’s mouth pursed. “The snow’s gonna start coming down soon and I’d hate to leave a kid alone in the dark when it does. You can never be sure what these roads will turn into.”

He had a point and Will’s resolve faltered. He’d almost broken his arm last year when riding his bike over a patch of black ice. “I don’t want to be a bother,” the boy said eventually, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea of the military reaching out to help some random kid.

As if to prove his concerns invalid, Hairy smiled. His mustache tickled at his mouth, framing it with sincerity, and Will’s body warmed. It almost reminded him of the one Lucas’ dad made when they caught him skimping on his diet; so long as Mrs. Sinclair didn’t find out, it was just between them.

The man reached out his hand and beckoned him forwards. “Nah, it’s no problem. We’re traveling the same way and you said your place isn’t far. Might as well kill two birds with one stone, right?”

Well, when put like that refusing did sound a little silly. With a hesitant, but no less excited tug of the lips, Will nodded his head, mop of brown hair flopping about as he did. “I-I guess so. Thanks.” He maneuvered himself off the bike and made his way over towards where another man in full military uniform had opened the side door.

Will handed him first the bike, which the new man took with appropriate care, and then clamored into the van himself. It was almost uncomfortably warm inside, his body still somewhat under the thrall of adrenaline, but his hands prickled with the sense of renewed feeling and he smiled at the soldier who had helped him in. The door closed with an almost inaudible *click*.

“Better?” The towering man asked, face slack in an easy-going expression that had Will relaxing against his seat.

“Much,” he replied, a bit overwhelmed by his good fortune. His friends were *not* going to believe this!

The man chuckled. "Good."

"Hey, kid," Hairy called from up front, drawing Will's attention.
"Wanna tell me how to get you home?"

"Oh, right, sorry." Will scratched at the tiny mole above his lip nervously as he got up to look through to the front of the van. Shameful embarrassment shuddered through him, and he mentally cuffed himself on the back of the head like his dad used to do when he was acting particularly abnormal. "Um, you just go straight down." The sixth sense of someone's hand approaching was the only warning Will got.

There was a piercing sting somewhere along his neck and then nothing. Oblivion claimed him, smothering him in its embrace before he even had the thought to call for help.

November 6, 1983

Hawkins, Indiana

Joyce Byers began her day as she had everyday for the past year: downing two pills of Tuinal and smoking her way through half a pack of cigarettes.

Her hand grazed the bed, finding the other side cool to the touch. A weak, gaping part of her ached at the chill, but another – stronger – part could only feel relief. He wasn't here. Joyce mentally checked off Day Three in the back of her head.

Warm blankets covered her half of the bed, but she had neither the inclination nor the energy to pull herself from the sheets until after she'd laid there for twenty minutes drowning her thoughts in last night's beer can. In fact, it wasn't until she heard the telltale sounds of pans clashing and banging about the kitchen that she somehow managed to commandeer the necessary zeal to get up.

The comforting scent of half-cooked bacon filtered through the thick smoke of her room and she allowed herself a practiced smile before rising to meet the day. Her work uniform – a simple blue vest and

name tag – hung over the old rocking chair she'd never felt the need to throw away and she tossed it on over the same clothes she'd worn the day before. Exiting her room, Joyce meandered her way down the carpeted hallway towards the bathroom to begin her morning debate on whether or not to put some effort into her appearance.

Like always, the option for “no” won out, and Joyce emerged five minutes later having only had the energy to brush the knots from her hair and the stink from her breath. She breezed past the doors lining the hall, pausing only once to stare briefly at the lone closed off room in the house. Sunlight – *too bright, too happy, too beckoning* – filtered in under the doorway, highlighting the trail of dust that rested there as if to remind Joyce of how long it had been since anyone had stepped foot inside. Subconsciously, she reached her hand out, a shiver racing down her spine as flesh met cool metal. The effect was immediate. Her vision swam. The muscles in her face froze. Vertigo hit – completely familiar and yet eternally new all at the same time – and she closed her eyes to offset the ensuing nausea.

One, two, three–

Inhale.

–four, five, six–

Exhale.

–seven, eight, nine–

Open.

–ten.

The world righted itself, tilt only slightly skewed, but enough for Joyce to pull herself away without tipping over. She'd been getting better about that. Her feet tumbled down the rough carpet in a carefully controlled staccato of enforced normality before she shuffled into the kitchen and collapsed onto one of the creaky, yellow chairs with an unsteady breath.

“Mrs. Wheeler called,” her son remarked as if it counted as a greeting. His back was still turned to her, shoulder blades flexing

while he maneuvered still-sizzling eggs and bacon onto a plate. “I told her you’d call her back.”

Joyce grunted noncommittally. She scrubbed a hand down her face and idly grabbed for the opened carton of orange juice. “I’ll call later.”

“That’s what you said last time and you didn’t do it,” Jonathan said, placing the food in front of her.

“I forgot.”

“No you didn’t.” He grabbed the chair across from her and sat down, reaching forward to grab the salt. “You can’t keep avoiding her, mom.”

“I am *not* avoiding her.”

“She’s called six times this week and you haven’t spoken to her once.”

“I’ve been busy!”

“No you haven’t.” He set the salt back down on the table a little too forcefully and leaned forward. The old table creaked ominously and Joyce made a mental note to find a replacement. She didn’t think the kitchen had been updated since the mid-70s. “You’ve had plenty of time. The doctor said-”

Joyce flung her head back and rolled her eyes. “Oh, the doctor!”

“Yes, the doctor. You’re supposed to listen to him, remember? That’s why you went to him in the first place.”

“I thought it was because your father threatened to take you away if I didn’t.”

“That’s not-” Jonathan cut himself off. He took a deep breath to reign himself in before saying, “You can’t do this, mom. The doctor said you can’t keep retreating. You have to talk to people.”

“I do talk to people.” She twirled the scrambled eggs between her

fork, pointedly not looking at her oldest.

“Yeah, at work, when you have to.” He sighed, sending her a pleading look. “Mom, you can’t do this again.”

Joyce opened her mouth, no doubt to rebuke him, before closing her eyes and slowly stopping herself. The problem was Jonathan wasn’t wrong. The only people she really talked to were he and his father, and whoever happened to walk into the store. She’d become a recluse, and it wasn’t like she’d been much of a social butterfly before.

“I will...call her tonight,” Joyce relented. It was the least she could do. Wonder of wonders Karen hadn’t already abandoned her entirely.

Jonathan nodded, stuffing his face with a fork-full of eggs. He looked down and bobbed his head as if preparing to say something he wasn’t sure she would particularly like. “She, uh, she said she was gonna bring Mike to visit today – or tomorrow. Probably bring the boys, too.”

His mother stilled, her fork hovering over her now cold food. She cleared her throat awkwardly and covered her mouth with her napkin as if needing something for her hands to do. “Did she say when?” She asked with forced composure.

“No. Probably not until later. Wi—Mike’s never been a morning person.”

Joyce broke a crispy piece of bacon between her fingers and let them fall. Jonathan’s stumble had not been missed by either of them. “I remember.”

“So...later,” he reaffirmed with another fork-full.

“Later.”

The morning conversation trailed off from there into stilted, one-note exchanges that would have been utterly foreign a year ago. The scrapes and screeches of knives on plastic filled the heavy silence as Joyce and Jonathan piled tasteless food into their mouths. It stuck like gum between their teeth, with a texture that was simultaneously

gagging and tacky. Like always, they swallowed past their reflexes in an effort to fill their stomachs.

Once they'd managed to down at least half their plates, they gathered them together and dumped the remaining food into Chester's dog bowl for whenever the pup decided to wake up. The empty dishes were then tossed into the sink, right on top of the other dirty cutlery that had accumulated over the past week. They would clean it all later. The next few minutes were spent dithering about in an effort to waste time before they just couldn't put it off anymore. The air around them stilled, filled with the heavy sensation of impending anticipation and dread.

"Ready?" Jonathan asked as he grabbed his coat from where he'd tossed it on the couch. His blue eyes trailed his mother searchingly, as if waiting for her to shatter, and Joyce tried not to feel insulted. He had his reasons; she couldn't deny that.

She took a deep calming breath, digging a cigarette from her pocket and lighting it. Another inhalation – this one with smoke – and she felt her nerves calm. "Ready."

The November chill followed them as they left the house, making their hands rattle even within the heated car. They rode in silence and Joyce finished two more cigarettes before they reached their destination, sharing only one with Jonathan. Thankfully, the streets of Hawkins were empty of almost all congestion. At this time, most people were either still getting up or already in church, but Joyce had long lost any faith in religion and so didn't bother.

Jonathan's old LTD pulled into the now familiar parking lot not fifteen minutes later, and, not for the first time, Joyce felt a rush of nausea flow through her. She hated how far away they were, hated that she had to be here, and hated how much this place seemed determined to suck her in. Her stomach rolled, and she must have swayed because Jonathan's hand was suddenly in her's, warm and welcoming like when he was still a little boy that needed to hold her hand. Maybe he did. Joyce couldn't be sure, but she squeezed back and allowed him to pull her further amongst the carefully arranged rows of marble.

Headstone upon headstone passed them by and Joyce mentally listed off the names without even bothering to look.

Kathleen M. Applegate

Marcus J. Jones

Henry Louis Waters

On and on they went. One after the other, until she and her son reached the only one that mattered.

William J. Byers

Beloved Son

March 22, 1971 – November 6, 1982

One year. It had already been one year. Some part of Joyce couldn't believe it. She felt the nauseating, burning ache as if it was still happening. The rush of fear she'd felt when she realized he never came home. Those agonizing two days of searching. Hopper's face as he told her Will had been found. State troopers pulling his body out from under the snow drift.

Planning the funeral.

Burying her son.

Joyce stifled a sob as she and Jonathan lowered themselves hand-in-hand onto the grass. Cool morning dew soaked through her pants, but she couldn't bring herself to care. If she closed her eyes, she could almost pretend it was Will giving her a hug.

She lit another cigarette.

"Hi, Will. We're back." Jonathan's soothing tone filled out the silence of the cemetery, calming Joyce's heart and almost fooling her into thinking this was normal. She couldn't bring herself to talk just yet, but was happy to listen to her son talk if only it kept her from thinking. "Um, I finally got that car I told you I was looking at. The one Mr. Wilkes said he would save for me. It needs a bit of work, but,

um, it's really nice. I, uh, I'll take some pictures so I can show you. Sound good?" There was no response, but Jonathan wasn't deterred. In fact, he seemed to be listening. After a moment, he smiled, wistful. "Good. I thought you'd like that."

His head cocked towards Joyce, watching to see if she wanted a chance to talk. She didn't.

Jonathan continued. "Ah, Mrs. Wheeler called. She said she might bring Mike over later. Dustin and Lucas will probably come, too. I ran into Mrs. Henderson at the supermarket and she said Dustin's been wanting to visit so....yeah. They'll be coming by." He ran a hand under his nose and sniffled. It really was very cold out. "They, uh, they miss you. I see them at school sometimes. Seventh grade. They lost the last science fair, but said they'll try again this year and see what happens. Lucas said their schematics weren't as good as yours w-were." He choked on the last word, hurriedly wiping at his eyes with his free hand, while Joyce tightened her grip on the other.

Sometimes she wondered why they punished themselves like this, until remembering the alternative.

"Lonnie's still living with us, but he couldn't make it today," and the expression that crossed Jonathan's face said he wasn't sorry about it one bit. Inwardly, Joyce flinched. How far had she fallen that she'd allowed Lonnie back into their lives? But it just felt so good to have him back. It offered an image of stability she desperately needed. Was it wrong to need that? "Maybe he'll come later." Doubtful, but not completely impossible. He had come once, for the funeral.

"Anyway," the teenager shook away the unpleasant topic, "I brought some pictures if you wanted to see them. See, here's Chester," he pulled out the photograph of Will's dog, now quite a bit bigger than he'd been last year when Will found him. "And here's your fort. We kept it up. The boys like to go in and read your comics sometimes. Even brought some of their own 'cause it gets tiring to keep going back and forth. And here's..." Jonathan went on. Picture after picture, he detailed each one, sometimes embellishing the stories with little anecdotes and sometimes just saying one or two words.

Hours passed in this manner. Joyce remained quiet as she listened to

the stories; sometimes smiling, sometimes smothering sobs between swallowed lips. It was amazing the contradictory euphoria and suffocation a graveyard could invoke. Birds chirped amongst the trees and the lingering voices of other visitors echoed over the headstones in an indecipherable jumble. Joyce thought Will would have enjoyed the noise. He'd always liked simple things like that. A few red and brown leaves fell from the overhanging trees, and Joyce caught a couple in her hands. She took turns shredding them, just to give her fingers something to do.

Her watch hit ten when Jonathan's chatter began to peter out. A few more ghostly breezes tickled their ears and stung their noses with cold. Cherry-kissed cheeks stood on display for the world to see. The grass had long dried.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "I-I guess...it's getting late. We have to get going now, okay, Will? But we'll be back later so don't worry." His chin trembled and he blinked rapidly. "I love you, and I'll talk to you soon, okay?" He waited a second as if Will would respond. "Okay." His eyes flickered to his mother in askance. "Do you want me to drive you to work? I'm covering for Eric so we'll get off around the same time."

The automatic response was no. Years of reiterating the same information – *don't work at the same time* – had conditioned her against such offers, but present circumstances meant that it was better for both of them to be out of the house. They didn't have a reason to stay home now, and it was easier to fill the void when they were together than when one of them was left alone.

Voice scratchy, Joyce agreed. "Okay." She allowed him to lift her from the ground and they both brushed off the dirt and grass stains to the best of their abilities. They stood there for a spell, neither wanting to leave before Jonathan took a staggering step forwards.

"I'll, uh, I'll go start the car." His head tilted to the tiny gravestone meaningfully, one that told her to take as long as she needed, and Joyce swallowed back gratitude. She tightened her grip on his hand before letting go and watched as he crested over the hill and out of sight.

Like always, she crushed the niggling fear of never seeing him again.

It wouldn't happen. Not again.

Joyce choked. It was half laughter, mostly sobs, and broke from her completely against her will.

The simple plaque mocked her.

"I'm sorry, honey," she spoke, pointedly looking into the tree line. "I know I didn't really get to talk much, but your brother is much better at it than me." Joyce took a deep, bracing breath. "I have to get to work now, but, *um*, I brought you these." She dug through her bag and pulled out a clump of crayons held together by a simple rubberband. "I thought you'd like to have them. I even sharpened them for you, see?" Indeed, the colored wax had been sharpened to almost useless points. If anyone actually tried to use them, they would surely snap.

"Anyway," she wiped clammy palms against her pant legs, "I'll come by tomorrow. Jonathan has school, but I'm sure Chester would like to visit. And, *um*—"

"Joyce?" The concerned, sympathetic tones of Karen Wheeler sounded behind her and Joyce found herself spinning around to face the much more put-together housewife. Behind her, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin stood, their toes scuffing up the dirt and small bouquets of flowers clutched in their hands. Joyce didn't doubt they were Karen's idea, and she smothered down the guilt at having not thought to bring the same.

Will would appreciate the color.

Joyce wiped at her eyes. She hadn't even realized they'd grown wet. "Karen. Hi." She sniffled and shoved her hands into the pockets of her vest. "I-I was going to call you." Maybe if she had she would have known they'd be here.

Karen's brow furrowed, easily catching the lie, but too kind to call her out on it. She offered Joyce a pitying smile and it took all of the woman's self control not to rip it right off her face. "Well, I guess we

can save the time now.”

“Yeah, I guess we can.” She sniffled again, blaming it on the cold, and crossed her arms protectively against her chest. “Did you...?” She motioned to the headstone and shimmied out of the way with jittery steps.

God, she wanted a smoke.

“Oh, thank you. Boys,” Karen gestured, probably just to have something to say. She gently pushed the boys forward, and they moved on stilted feet, eyes flashing to Joyce as if they couldn’t decide what to do.

Now feeling like an outsider, Joyce backed up. Amazing how company made her feel more alone than when she was actually alone. Her fingers curled around the empty cigarette box as if it could give her the same release. “I should be getting to work,” she heard herself say, and Karen turned to her, startled.

“You’re working today? Joyce-”

“Only the afternoon,” Joyce cut her off. “Donald can’t afford to give me the whole day and we need the money. Jonathan will be in college in a couple years.”

Karen’s eyes flickered, displaying her displeasure to the world. “Well, yes, but one day surely can’t-”

“It’s fine. He let me have the morning, which is all I really needed. The distraction helps.”

Mrs. Wheeler still didn’t look happy about it, but knew better than to argue with her longtime friend. At least Joyce was getting out. It was more than she could say for this time last year.

“Well,” Karen began, “if you need anything, you know where to find me.”

“Right, thank you.” Awkward silence filled the air with neither woman knowing quite what to say or how to separate.

Dustin, as per usual, saved the day.

He stepped forward from where he and the other boys had been watching with apprehension and tightly wound his arms around Joyce's middle. The sweet scent of chrysanthemum wafted up from the flowers still clutched in his hands. Too surprised to react quickly, Joyce only had time to lay shaking hands on the middle-schooler's shoulders before he pulled away and offered her a toothless smile. "We'll see you later, Ms. Byers. There's a new comic and we need the fort."

Whether it was the smile, the hug, or the completely matter-of-fact way he'd spoken, Joyce felt the knot in her stomach loosen just enough to let her smile. It might have even reached her eyes. "It's all yours."

He grinned again, the expression mirrored on the faces of Mike and Lucas, and Joyce found it in herself to move away. Her watch read ten-thirty.

She was going to be late.

"I'll talk to you later, Karen."

"Yes, later." Whether Karen believed it or not wasn't apparent, but she let her go without any further fuss and for that Joyce was grateful.

The boys' voices followed her as her feet carried her away from the gravestone and back towards the car.

Henry Louis Waters

Marcus J. Jones

Kathleen M. Applegate

Headstone after headstone – each one telling her exactly how far away she was from her son.

She clutched tighter to the empty cigarette box.

Jonathan's car stood out like a sore thumb amidst the greens and greys of the cemetery, and she could see him warming up his hands through the closed window. The longing pull in her chest that always awoke before she left reared its ugly head and she forced it back with a strength born from extensive practice.

The car loomed closer and she opened the side door with perhaps a little more force than was necessary. Jonathan raised one concerned eyebrow in her direction, but something on her face must have told him not to ask any questions. Joyce half wondered if he'd seen Karen on his way back, but shook the thought away with a frown. It didn't matter whether or not he had, and a part of her was relieved she could finally tick that little box under social interaction off. Now all she had to do was get through the rest of the day.

"Let's go," she muttered, closing her eyes as Jonathan gunned the engine.

She'd be back tomorrow. Until then, life went on.

"Are you both ready?"

Two children bobbed their heads hesitantly as they walked on either side of the white-haired man. Their tiny hands grasped his with the tenacity of frightened toddlers, and their bony legs quaked imperceptibly from the chill. Completely androgynous, it was almost impossible to tell the two apart. Their waif-like figures dwarfed them in comparison to the man, and their only distinguishing features consisted of a black tattoo printed along their wrists and a small mole above one of the children's lips.

Their route was a comfortable one if familiarity bred such sentiments. They were led down the well-trodden corridors of the Hawkins National Laboratory, bare feet slapping against sterile tiles in short, detached echoes. Plain metal doors were the only things that broke up the halls' monotony, differentiated simply by the escalating numbers printed beside them, and florescent lights brightened overhead. The children blinked past the spots sent floating in front of their vision.

“Now, when we get in there I want both of you to be on your best behavior, okay? We have a very special job to do today,” the imposing man stated. He cut a clean figure in his blue fitted suit and he smiled down at the two children with a paternal affection that was just two notes shy of being sincere.

The children, either not noticing the underlying order or too used to it to know the difference, only nodded. “Yes, Papa,” the one in the beige wetsuit replied. Her voice was soft and distinctly submissive, but still unmistakably female.

“Very good, Eleven,” Papa said. His head craned to the other child. “Twelve? Did you understand?”

The other child, garbed in a loose-fitting hospital gown, nodded again. “Yes, Papa,” he replied, in the quiet, high-pitched tone of a pre-pubescent male.

Papa’s lips twitched in satisfaction. He squeezed their hands once as they approached a large set of double doors before letting go and typing in a short code along the keypad. The sound of a deadbolt being released sounded throughout the emptiness and Papa grabbed their hands again as he ushered the children inside.

He led them into a vast room, filled with bright lights and whitewashed walls. State-of-the-art computers lined their way, beeping and whirring as they fired to life. Eleven and Twelve pressed themselves into Papa’s side, trepidation oozing off of them in waves. Around them, men in lab coats dithered about carrying clipboards and adjusting dials. Many of them stopped and stared as the trio walked by, their gazes like physical weights sitting on the children’s shoulders.

“It’s okay,” Papa reassured. “Don’t be frightened. These are all friends.” *Friends?* The little boy found himself biting his tongue, though he couldn’t pinpoint exactly why this was so. It was a foreign word, tinged only with half-forgotten recognition that hurt him to think about. Eleven could only stare in incomprehension.

Papa pulled them further into the chamber. “They’re just here to watch,” he continued as if unable to sense their unease. “Don’t focus

on them. Stay in here, like before.” He let go of their hands to give them encouraging pats on the head, and the children took in shallow breaths.

Somehow, it didn’t help.

Their hearts still raced with each eye turned to them.

“Yes, Papa,” Eleven mumbled, brown orbs unable to look away from the observing scientists. Men traveled loudly overhead along the catwalks and a large tank stood ominously to the side. Crystalline blue water flowed invitingly about the tank, but all Eleven could feel was trepidation as Papa pulled them forward towards the stairs.

Whether Twelve saw her or somehow sensed her reluctance she didn’t know, but he still managed to shoot her a slight smile – barely a twitch of the lips – behind Papa’s back. It didn’t necessarily ease her apprehension, but the reinforcement of their solidarity allowed her to respond with a shaky, but no less sincere, grin.

Their feet clunked heavily up the stairs; Papa lead at the front while the two children trailed at his back as they had been trained. If their hands touched it was only because the stairwell was so narrow. They reached the top deck and were guided past the small group of lab attendants manning the computers. One of the men turned the wheel above the tank to open it and Eleven struggled not to flinch at the creaking sound.

Papa held out his hand to her. “Eleven,” he beckoned, “I want you to stand over here, alright? And Twelve,” he motioned with his other hand, “I need you to stand over here.” The man motioned over to where a small metal desk had been bolted to the deck. Another, younger man stood behind it and his heavy hand clapped down on Twelve’s shoulder with enough force to send the boy tumbling into the chair.

Eleven bit her lip. A little voice in the back of her head wanted to call the man out, but she lacked the words necessary to do so. Even if she did, no doubt both children would get in trouble and that was something they both desperately wanted to avoid.

Papa came forward with a cap composed of wires and electrodes, stretching it across her buzzed head and ensuring the leads stuck to her temples. The wires coalesced at the base of her scull to trail along the floor. They traveled for a distance before connecting to an identical cap situated atop Twelve's head, linking them together.

It was the only form of solace they could find in this situation. At the very least, they had each other.

"Now, remember," Papa said, drawing her attention to him. "Whatever it is, it can't hurt you. Not from here. So there's nothing to be frightened of." Eleven took in a steadyng breath, hoping to gather strength from this reassurance, but instead it only served to widen the pit that had already been growing in her stomach for a week. The memory of her last dip - of that *thing* - made her hesitant to take even one more step, but Papa's hands guided her forwards anyway. The stand that would lower her into the bath loomed before her and she grasped hold of the hand rails nervously.

"It's reaching out to you," Papa soothed, as if that was something she wanted, "cause it wants you." He leaned in, lines settling in earnest along his brow. "Hmm? It's calling you...so don't turn away from it this time. I want you to find it." He smiled. A chill spread through Eleven's veins. "Understand?"

"Yes." It was the only thing she could get herself to say. Her eyes flickered to the side in an effort to catch Twelve's gaze, but he was already looking away, focused on the paper before him with a pencil clenched in his hand. He was ready. She had to be too.

Her soft reply must have been enough for Papa because when she turned back he was already nodding, hand motioning for her to be lowered in. The stand jolted, and the familiar sensation of wet nothingness touched her skin as she entered the water. A helmet to maintain oxygen was placed over her head and the last thing Eleven saw before the blackout doors shut were the hungry gazes of a dozen scientists watching her from the outside.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well...I'm not sure how much I like this starting

chapter, but I'm not sure if that's just because I've been staring at it too long. If you liked it, please let me know or let me know how to improve it. Thank you so much for reading!

2. Dead and Disappeared

November 6, 1982

Hawkins National Lab, Indiana

Will Byers swam to consciousness in spurts.

It started off with a faint notion of pressure along his arms. He drifted in and out as the stress changed and shifted around his torso or neck or head, and he was never quite sure if what he felt was real or imagined. He forgot with every awakening, each time coming closer and closer to that edge of consciousness before falling back into the abyss.

The darkness was soothing, but slowly Will became aware of something firm under his body and the faint nip of air conditioning along his legs. His head felt lighter as if he was missing something, and he instinctively brushed it against what could only have been a pillow, taking in the unfamiliar sensation with fatigued indifference before nodding off again.

For hours, he repeated this process of vacillating lucidity. Muffled conversations flowed around him, but he was too far-gone to rearrange them into something coherent. No doubt it was just mom or Jonathan getting in from work. Perhaps it was both of them, though mom didn't like it when his brother worked the same hours she did. She preferred to have one of them at home for Will even though he felt he was certainly old enough now to be left on his own. Either way, the explanation was satisfying to the point that Will felt safe enough to cycle through sleep unhindered.

His final burst back into awareness came in the form of pain.

The boy's forearm ached with the stinging itch of an hours-old wound, and his neck pulsed uncomfortably from where something sharp had pierced his skin. It thudded in time with his heart, hot against the hard surface of whatever he was sleeping on, and he scrunched his eyes further together in an effort to stave off consciousness. Even through his lids he could tell whatever place he'd entered into was bright with harsh, unwelcomed lighting.

A loud groan edged its way past his lips and Will instinctively flung his tender arm over his face in an effort to drown out the light. He regretted it instantly. Waves of pain surged throughout his body, catapulting the boy upwards into agonizing wakefulness.

“Oh, no, no, no, don’t do that,” a deep baritone stated over his cries. “We don’t want you hurting yourself.” An arm, large and unfamiliar, wound around his shoulders and Will was too concerned with the throbbing to bother fighting it off. The speaker – whoever he was – grabbed ahold of his arm and pulled it gently away from where the boy had it cradled against his chest. Will flinched, but otherwise made no move to get away as the arm was eased onto his lap.

“W-who-?” Will choked. His throat felt as if it had been scraped raw by sandpaper and he found himself hunching over in a full body dry heave. The man shifted, his image a mish-mash of blurred colors and non-existent lines, and Will instinctively jolted back.

He felt the man shaking against him and it took the boy a moment to realize it was from laughter. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you.” The bed shifted again and Will heard the telltale sound of water being poured into a cup.

The cup – plastic, like something he’d find at the dentist’s – appeared in front of him, held to his lips by the man’s steady hand. Will lapped up the water greedily, feeling the soothing liquid coat his throat and jolting him to a sense of awareness not completely encumbered by pain.

“There we go,” his caretaker soothed, rubbing his back. “Feel better?”

Will nodded. He let the cup go with a gasp, scrambling for the air he’d denied himself in his quest to quench his thirst. Slowly, he took stock of the room: white-tiled walls surrounded him on all sides creating an impersonal atmosphere that would have been more unsettling if this whole situation wasn’t completely bizarre. A single steel-bolt door separated him from whatever lurked outside, and his bed would have been more at home in a prison than wherever the hell he was. There was a side table with a little lamp for reading, but perhaps the most disquieting aspect of the room was the large camera hanging from the ceiling, its lens trained on him.

“W-where am I?” He heard himself asking, and a small part of him bemoaned how weak he sounded.

The man – *some sort of doctor*, Will surmised by his lab coat – thankfully didn’t berate him for it, but instead plastered on a smile that said he completely understood just how confusing this must be. “You’re in a hospital. My name is Dr. Brenner. We’d hoped you’d sleep a little longer so you wouldn’t wake up in so much pain.”

“A hospital?” Why was he in the hospital? Where was his mom? “Did I fall?”

Dr. Brenner’s brow furrowed. “Fall?”

“My bike. I was going home.” At least, he thought he was. Will tried to dredge up an image of what he’d been doing before all of...*this*, but all it did was give him an unnecessary headache.

His caretaker’s expression smoothed over in realization before settling into something that sent Will’s heart pounding in apprehension. “No, you didn’t fall.”

“Then why-?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” The doctor interrupted, not unkindly. It wouldn’t surprise Will to know the man was used to such situations. He supposed, as a doctor, this Brenner fellow must be no stranger to the peculiar.

“I-” Will’s doe eyes flickered as he once more tried to recall a memory – any memory – but all he was met with was the brief echo of Mike’s voice calling after him and then...nothing. Will shook his head. Panic set in and his chest ached with the vigor of his breathing.

Dr. Brenner relaxed. His blue eyes, somewhat clouded with age, eased as he leaned in to create what Will supposed was an attempt at a more comforting atmosphere. It didn’t work. The man’s arm was still wrapped firmly around him, but at least it gave the child a much-needed anchor against a world he was quickly coming to hope was nothing more than a bad dream.

“I see,” the man said, resigned. He squeezed Will’s shoulders and the

little boy squirmed uncomfortably against the stranger's hold. "We-"

"Is my mom here?" Will cut off, not caring about rudeness. It didn't even occur to him that the doctor might not even know who he was, let alone his mother. For all he knew he'd never even made it home. Did his mom know where he was? If she did, doubtless she would already be here, and since she wasn't Will could only assume she was currently at home, probably out of her mind with worry. The very thought filled him with guilt.

If possible, Dr. Brenner's expression pinched further into something edging dangerously close to pity. Will's sense of panic grew into full-blown nausea. "Will," (*So he does know who I am!*), "I'm so sorry, but I'm afraid there was an...*incident*."

"Incident?" Will's tongue curled around the ominous term as if it were foreign.

Brenner nodded. "There was a fire. We only just managed to save you," and here he ran a hand through Will's shorn hair. The boy hadn't even noticed the loss. "But I'm afraid your family didn't make it."

What? That didn't make sense. Will couldn't comprehend it. It was as if Brenner was speaking another language; a garbled language full of nonsense and lies. Fire – burning and acrid – slithered its way up from the pit in his stomach, and he found himself shoving the (*horrible, cruel, lying*) man away from him before he even registered what he was doing.

"Will..." the man tried to start, but Will was having none of it.

"No," he stated, resolute and in denial all at once. "You're lying." Brenner had to be lying. His mom wasn't dead. His brother wasn't dead. They weren't, they weren't, they weren't!

"I'm sor-"

"You're lying!"

Silence met Will's scream. It seemed to suck the air from the room as its occupants teetered along some unknown precipice. Will's

breathing staggered, hot tears building pressure behind his eyes and clogging his throat. This had to be a dream. It had to be.

Dr. Brenner pressed swallowed lips together and expunged a steady stream of air from his nose. “I wish I was lying, son, but I’m not.”

Will’s lip trembled. He cast shimmering eyes to Brenner. “How?” He hated how his voice cracked over the question.

The man took a deep breath. “Come with me.” He squeezed Will as if to nudge him to his feet, but the boy was having none of it. He stubbornly remained in the bed even as Brenner got to his feet and held out a hand. Will shook his head.

“No,” the little boy rasped.

“Will, it’s very important that you come with me.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to see what I’m going to show you, okay? It will help you understand.”

Will wasn’t sure he wanted to understand. He wanted this man to be lying. The longer he stayed put, the longer he could believe that.

There was a sigh from above him and then Dr. Brenner was crouched beside the bed. “I know this is hard for you. I can’t imagine how you’re feeling right now, but it’s very important that you come with me, okay? I think you’ll regret it if you don’t.” He held out his hand again.

Will stared at the man for a long moment, his eyes shimmery and pounding with heat. Hesitantly, almost with mechanical quality, he reached across with his unbandaged arm and took hold of Dr. Brenner’s hand, allowing the man to gently tug him out from under the covers. His bare feet hit the ice-cold tile with startlingly little reaction, almost as if his whole body was already too numb to notice.

Brenner led him towards the door. There was a breeze about Will’s legs that alerted him to the hospital gown that had replaced his clothes, and in any other time or situation he probably would have

blushed at the thought of a stranger seeing him naked. As it were, this change in attire was barely a blip on his radar; he was far too entrenched in convincing himself that this was all a big misunderstanding.

Just because mom and Jonathan hadn't been found outside didn't mean they were dead. Maybe Will had been running late and they went out looking. Maybe they'd escaped and were hiding in the woods. Maybe Brenner and whoever else had just missed them. Maybe this was all just one big mistake. Will wouldn't hold it against Brenner if it was. People made mistakes all the time. It was human nature.

The echo of a deadbolt being released sounded somewhere out of Will's peripheral, and he was led out of the room into a barren hallway that somehow managed to be both soothing and sinister all at the same time. He would have expected a hospital to be busier, and while he was happy for the lack of attention, such silence struck him as decidedly odd. This was definitely not Hawkins Memorial. He'd had enough incidents in the past to know that.

Brenner continued to hold his hand as he guided the boy down the labyrinthine hallways. Had he been more aware Will might have tried to remember the route, but the uniformity surrounding him made even that a near impossibility. The doctor's pace was just slightly too fast for Will's short legs, and he had to spend what little attention he could muster on keeping up without tripping.

Their walk lasted five (*agonizing*) minutes, but Will felt he could have blinked and missed it. They stood in front of a door that looked no different from any of the others and Will watched as Dr. Brenner typed in a short code. The lock (*another deadbolt*, Will thought in distant confusion), clicked open and the boy was quickly ushered inside.

He wished he wasn't. He wished he could have remained outside forever.

Two metal tables stood in the center, white sheets draping down across the lumpy subjects positioned under them. An ugly brown stain was beginning to overtake the sterile quality of those coverings

and Will found himself not wanting to move. He knew what would happen if he did and the idea of that – of accepting reality – was too painful to swallow.

“Will,” Dr. Brenner urged. “I know this is hard, but I’ll be right beside you the whole time, alright? You don’t have anything to be afraid of.”

Will begged to differ. As far as he was concerned, he had everything to be afraid of.

But, in the end, the choice wasn’t his to make. Something touched his shoulder and Will was pushed forward. His feet staggered, tripping over each other as they lurched out of tempo with the pounding of his heart. It wasn’t true. It wasn’t true. It was not true.

Brenner pulled back the white sheets and the world fell out from under him.

“There was a fire at your house,” Brenner reiterated. It sounded so distant, like a record playing in another room. “You were found outside. We managed to save you before the fire spread too far, but I’m afraid your mother and brother were not so lucky.”

Lucky? No, there was no luck here.

His mother’s face (*so loving, so caring, always ready with a smile for him no matter how hard things got*) was half blackened by necrotized flesh and ash. Her hair was mostly gone and her skin – what little was left – had already begun to shift into the waxy complexion of death. For the first time, she looked frail. There was no more strength, no more love, no more anything – just a decomposing corpse already half gone.

“We found them inside the house,” the doctor continued as if he thought Will was listening. “We think the fire might have started in the living room. A busted gas main perhaps. Your mother was found in the kitchen, your brother in his room. If it helps, we think he was asleep.”

Help? There was no help here. His brother was gone. Jonathan

(wonderful, creative, protective Jonathan who always knew just what to say and just what to do) was gone. Will's only consolation was that he didn't look as bad as their mother, not that that meant anything. The burns that seemed to lay a patchwork into Joyce's skin had avoided Jonathan, but the soot around his brother's nose and mouth offered just as many unwanted hints to the teenager's demise. Did it hurt – suffocating? Was it worse than burning or were they both equally painful? Did he know what was happening or was Brenner right - he was just asleep? Will didn't know, but he figured anything had to be better than this.

"Now, we're trying to get in contact with your father, but we've been having trouble locating him. If he can't be found, I'm afraid you'll have to stay with us until he is, but we'll do everything we can to..." the voice garbled in Will's ears.

Dad.

The very word sent a jumble of uncomfortable and not completely uncomplicated emotions swirling through him. The few moments of bonding he could boast with his father were always marred by the greater number of lies and deprecating insults. Will always tried to tell himself that Lonnie wasn't worth it, but it was hard not to want to please him. He hated that those lies and insults were not enough to wash away the shoddy memories of a lunch made just for him or a ball game his father had taken the time to bring him to. It didn't even matter that Will hated baseball.

But the idea of living with Lonnie – actually *living* with him – without his mother or brother there to act as a buffer sent a wave of visceral terror through his body. He wouldn't last a year. One or two episodes of drunken raging and Lonnie might just kill him by accident. Will immediately cut the thought short, but not before the word was out of his mouth. He didn't even realize he'd spoken.

"No."

He couldn't live with Lonnie. Even if – by some miracle – Lonnie didn't kill him, Will would still have to move to Indianapolis. He'd be cut off from his friends and his home and-and everything! He'd be completely uprooted. And Will wouldn't put it past his father to leave

Joyce and Jonathan behind in some pauper's lot just to save money. Living with Lonnie meant leaving them behind and Will would never do that. He'd rather die.

"No?" Dr. Brenner asked, sounding understandably befuddled. "You don't want us to inform your father you're here?"

Will shook his head. Shimmering eyes remained rooted on the empty shells of his family, but he was resolute. As far as Lonnie was concerned, they were all dead. "No," he said again. A niggling of pride briefly warmed his stomach at how steady he sounded.

"Alright," Brenner conceded. His hand tightened on Will's shoulder. "Is there anyone we can call?"

Mike.

Lucas.

Dustin.

Any one of them would gladly take him in and Will knew that because they'd talked about it during many an inane conversation that weren't meant to be taken seriously. But now the situation was serious, and boyish fantasies about becoming real brothers sounded so silly when his mom was *dead* and his brother was *dead*, and his only other option was *Lonnie*.

He couldn't...he couldn't just...*they were dead*.

Dr. Brenner bent down so that his mouth was level with Will's ear. "If you want, we can give you a few days to think about it. We can let the police know you're in the hospital, but can't be allowed visitors. Would that be something you'd like us to do?"

Unbidden, a sense of relief pooled through him. His thoughts slowed out of their rising panic. The idea of having some time to himself to think sounded glorious and all too tempting when he couldn't even wrap his mind around the fact that this was his reality. Without even being aware of it, Will nodded.

What did it say that he'd rather be around strangers than family?

Brenner clapped his shoulder. “Okay. Alright. You can stay here as long as you need. We’ll take good care of you, okay Will?”

Will’s lips trembled. “Okay,” he whispered.

“Good.” The doctor’s arm again wrapped around his shoulders and Will startled at the feeling of being tugged away.

“No!” He shouted, bandaged hand reaching out to stay with his family. He couldn’t leave. If he left he’d never see them again.

Brenner crouched in front of him, blocking his mother and brother from sight. Will tried to crane his neck in order to see them, but the older man kept him in place. He wanted to scream. “Will, I understand you don’t want to leave them, but you were hurt in that fire too, and it’s not good for you to be out of bed for too long yet.”

“But—”

“Don’t let this be the lasting memory you have of them. Remember them as you did yesterday, okay? They’d want that.”

It was as if a frog had settled in Will’s throat. “I don’t want to go.”

“I know you don’t, but this isn’t them anymore, and I think they’d want you to come first.”

That hurt. It hurt horribly and deeply and rang with so much truth that Will couldn’t even muster the energy to fight as Brenner silently led him from the room. Time slowed down. Each step was as hard as walking through molasses. His bare feet pulsed with a blunt sort of pain that only seemed to add more weight to his body, and something about the way the air brushed across his face felt cold and tight. He tried to muster up some sort of facial expression, but each attempt made his cheeks crack and pull uncomfortably.

He was walking away from his family.

He would never see them again.

Will didn’t even realize as the floor rose up to meet him. It was chilling – icy slate against cheeks sticky with salt. His jaw radiated

fire, but it was a mere footnote compared to the crushing mass in his chest.

He thought he might have stopped breathing.

"Oh, Will." Dr. Brenner's dulcet tone lofted about above him. The floor disappeared and Will found himself nestled like a baby in the older man's arms. A wet patch began to grow somewhere across Brenner's grey suit, but the doctor was kind enough not to bring attention to it. "Don't worry, son, everything will be okay."

Will closed his eyes and tried to believe it was true.

"A little backwards, don't you think? Taking the boy to see his family and then telling him not to think about it."

"Hm."

"It was genius, of course. Your plans always are, but-"

"Did you need something, Shepard?" Brenner turned a cool gaze to the waiting scientist, irritated by the interruption.

"Ah, yes." Shepard started, nervously fiddled with a thin folder. "The list of approved workers you asked for, sir." Brenner took the file by its spine and flipped it open to trail frosty eyes down the block of names. He ignored Shepard, standing like a anxious puppy awaiting orders, mentally going through the list to make sure there were no errors or inconsistencies.

The group was small; only six names barring his own, and only one of them lacked direct experience with this particular project. A frown twisted Brenner's face at the familiar signature.

"Connie Frazier. Why is she on this list?"

Shepard leaned forward as if reading the name himself would give him more insight. It was frankly absurd, but Brenner allowed him the tick. "It was thought that bringing in a female presence would help

the boy acclimate faster. He—”

“Remove her,” Brenner cut off. “Male, female – it won’t matter. Agent Frazier is not a scientist and has no business pretending such. Her presence is unnecessary.”

Shepard nodded, shortly, almost with a hesitant quality that told the older man he would be having words with someone higher up later on, but nevertheless proceeded to scratch out Frazier’s name with his pen. Brenner felt his face settle into something just short of pleased, and easily brushed aside the seething anger swelling in his stomach. That woman truly was a pest of the highest order, and it was with no small amount of ire that he could find no fault in her ability to do her job. She was sublimely clever, an asset to her agency, and as such impossible to get rid of.

No doubt, this was yet another one of her attempts to sink her claws into his masterwork.

“It won’t be long before the boy starts asking questions. Start him with a BZ solution, then lock him downstairs. Use three micrograms for now. No one is allowed access without my permission.” Especially Connie Frazier, her name left hanging in the air between them like a hangman’s noose.

“Yes, sir.”

Brenner swiveled, staring dispassionately at the boy displayed on one of the small monitors along the wall. He crossed his arms in thought as Shepard shuffled behind him. Will twisted restlessly. “Have the police been notified yet?”

“No. Surveillance recorded Jonathan Byers returning home around 2300 hours. No calls were made. Joyce Byers arrived home an hour later. Also no calls. Mrs. Byers’ shift starts at eight, so we can expect activity between six and seven. Considering the weekend, it’s possible she won’t think to check in on him before leaving, so the time may extend until nine or ten.”

“Place additional surveillance on the phones. I don’t want to take the risk.” They would need to follow the police carefully so as to make

sure the body was discovered in a timely manner. The sooner the better.

Another child shifted in her sleep on a separate monitor. She tossed a bit, her body eventually settling into a position not dissimilar to Will's. Brenner's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "And the girl? How did she perform today?"

"Anxiously," Shepard responded promptly. If he was thrown by the change in topic, it didn't show. "She displayed agitation during routine examination, inability to concentrate during practice, and insubordination when commanded to behave."

Brenner's lip curled. It was the only visible sign of his displeasure. "She knows better."

"With all due consideration," Shepard began, slowly, "she has been displaying abnormal behavior since preparations began for Subject 012."

"Correlation is not causation."

"No, but we had to place her in confinement only a few hours ago after her defiance broke the arms of two orderlies. She was...unruly."

A flicker of intrigue flashed across Brenner's face as the lines around his eyes smoothed over and his brows rose. It was as if a particularly important puzzle piece had fallen into place. "Unruly," he mused. "Only a few hours ago, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Interesting." He rubbed at his chin, fingers picking at folds brought about only by the unfortunate passage of time. A smile teased the corner of his mouth, but it was so minuscule as to be easily written off for wishful thinking. Shepard kept a respectful silence as he waited for his superior's orders. "Keep them as far apart as possible," the older man eventually said. "I want to monitor their behavior – see how she responds to his treatments. We need to know if she's just responding to the atmosphere or the boy in particular. We'll adjust the distance if it proves to be the latter."

“Should we move her now? She’s unlikely to fight back under the sedation.”

“No. Start with the boy. We need him pliable. The girl will be fine until tomorrow.”

“But-” Shepard cut himself short as icy blues settled upon him. He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Of course, sir. If you have no more need of me, I’ll prep the boy.”

Brenner nodded, waving the younger man away with little care. Shepard was a good scientist but Brenner had no patience for those who failed to understand his methods. It would do Shepard well to listen and follow first before he attempted to contradict him.

The quiet tapping of Shepard’s soft-soled shoes carried away from him as the man left to move 012 into confinement. If all went well, the boy would emerge entirely compliant – a perfect test subject. And depending on what they discovered with Subject 011...

Brenner allowed himself a quiet hum of satisfaction. If all went well, if everything worked, America’s enemies wouldn’t stand a chance.

Two children mattered little compared to the safety of the country.

And the safety of the country mattered only up until the progression of science surpassed it.

November 6, 1983
Hawkins National Lab, Indiana

Eleven!

Twelve!

Twelve’s panicked cry jolted through her brain like a bolt of electricity as Eleven skidded down the empty hallways. Her bare wet feet slapped loudly against the tile, breaths coming out in ragged bursts and hastily donned johnny gown billowing about her thighs.

Above her, the overhanging florescent lights flickered as if controlled by a switch-happy toddler. A few of the corridors in the underground labyrinth had only their backup lights to rely on, while others were completely awash in darkness. Alarms blared while shouting guards and terrified workers screamed out from the maze, and sweat coated Eleven's palms as she ducked and hid from any who might come her way.

It was cold. So, so cold.

A noise like something scraping at the floor sounded from behind her and the little girl hurdled around a corner just in time to escape the notice of a petrified scientist. She held herself in a tight ball, eyes shut as she waited for the man to vanish into the darkness. Her heart raced. Shaking fingers clawed at the smooth paint and each sound tore a shot of fear straight through her gut.

She didn't know what scared her more: the monster, or the people?

Her teeth chattered and her eyes stung as they swelled with terrified tears. *Twelve?* She called out into the buzzing thread that was their mental connection. It was difficult with the sirens so loud around her, but she couldn't let that stop her. Not when she could feel his fear like a physical weight on her chest. She needed him, needed to find him, to save him from wherever he'd ended up after Papa's friend yanked her from the bath.

Their usual bond was faint and flickering, humming just out of synch with each other so as to make the attempt almost useless. He was still there, but his usual bubble of warmth inside her mind was drowned under an icy veil she couldn't see passed. Each endeavor to reach out and find his location always seemed to stop just short of actually doing so, his presence phasing through her mental fingers like a thick fog.

Twelve! Eleven cried again, this time extending the call throughout the void rather than just their own unique bond. It echoed, faintly, before sliding into nothingness.

She trembled. Her eyes clenched even tighter as another scream echoed out over the alarms. *Please, please, please*, she begged, not

quite sure if she was pleading for a reprieve, Twelve, or even Papa. Maybe all three. Please, let the monster leave. Please, let Twelve answer. Please, let Papa come.

A tingle at the edge of her consciousness was the only answer she received and the sharp tang of blood under her nose had her eyes shooting open in stark terror. She hadn't done anything, she hadn't done anything, she hadn't-

Eleven inhaled sharply. Something cold settled over her. It was getting closer. She could feel it – a dark specter hanging over her shoulder.

Run. She should run. Everything in her body told her to, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get her feet to move. She was frozen, completely and utterly. Maybe if she stayed here it wouldn't notice her.

El...leV...un...eN!

Eleven's head shot up. Her eyes flickered as if doing so would make him appear and she felt herself inch away from the wall just enough to balance on the balls of her feet.

Twelve? She called again, hopefully. His voice was garbled, like an interrupted radio wave. *Twelve!*

...lev...Ru...

Twelve! Something, something not Twelve, sparked between them and she could almost feel the way Twelve recoiled at the sensation. It made her want to hug her legs to her chest and never move again. She had the sudden urge to curl into Twelve's side, to feel the warmth that always seemed to surround him. If she reached far enough she could almost feel him next to her. Was he? In her mind's eye, a phantom danced, a bright flash of gentle heat before it was suddenly yanked away and replaced by nauseating cold. Above, the lights flickered. The air froze in her lungs. It was that thing. The Monster. It found her.

...leVen...n...Un...

It was here. It was here. It was here!

Her breathing sped up, completely unbidden, and a wave of dizziness settled over her panicked form.

ELEVEN! She shot to her feet, wavering only slightly. Twelve's scream reverberated throughout her entire body. Electricity hummed and she became intimately aware of the danger she was in. There was a loud scratching from behind her. She was going to – going to –

...Un...N...RUN!

The little girl didn't need to be told twice. As if her legs had suddenly formed a mind of their own they took off, carrying her aching body down corridors streaked with blood and an eerie absence of bodies. Her hand felt heavy like someone was holding it, tugging her forward, and she knew without conscious recognition that it was Twelve, guiding her as far away from the monster as he could. She ached to reach out into that dark void that was their shared mind space. Maybe it would allow her to find him, but the desperation to survive won out and all she could focus her energy on was running.

Running, as far and as fast as she could.

She reached a set of vaguely familiar doors and, without thinking, stretched out with her mind to will them open. They flung from their hinges, the bang drowned out by the sirens, and she continued forward, birdlike-legs propelling her up a set of stairs. She climbed and she climbed, Twelve somehow tugging her forward as her strength flagged. Her lungs burned as she rose higher than she'd ever been allowed before.

Static shot through her and she immediately changed trajectory, flinging the closest door open with her mind. The veil seemed to settle heavily between her and Twelve as she felt his presence leave her hand. Panic resettled over her, pulling her to a sudden halt as she cast about for him.

Twelve!

Where was he? What happened? Where did he go?

...UN...ELE...RUN!

She started, feet twitching as she battled between listening and the desperate need to find him. Her mind tingled again with the sense of painful electricity that heralded the presence of the monster. It was close. It was searching for them. She couldn't let it find them.

Body coursing with dread, Eleven screwed up her courage and cast out once more into the void, hoping against hope Twelve would hear her. *Hide*, she bid. *Hide*.

Twelve did not respond and she could only hope he heard her as the encroaching monster forced her to move. It was ten times harder without Twelve there to pull her along, but she pushed forward, down unfamiliar corridors littered with abandoned equipment. She ran pell-mell across the hard tile, ignoring the shooting pain stitching itself into her side. She wasn't safe, not yet.

A set of glass doors appeared at the end of the hallway. Through them, the little girl could see a strange mix of pitch black and luminescent orange. It was unlike anything she'd ever glimpsed before, but in lieu of other options she shoved the doors aside and barreled through.

For the first time in her life, Eleven set foot outside. She didn't look back.

Close by, just over the fence of Hawkins Lab, all the lights in the sleepy town flickered – once, twice – and died.

Annoyed callers cursed at the dead telephone lines, small children cried, and three boys biked home from a night spent in half-hearted gaming at their old friend's fort. There were no mishaps, no disappearances, and the only difficulty anyone faced was the inconvenience of a power surge.

Five minutes later, the power came back and Hawkins, Indiana returned to normal.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well...it has been a while...I'm very sorry about that. Life got in the way, and I'm a slow writer regardless. I can't promise speedier updates, though I will definitely try. We're still kind of in that opening salvo, but once things pick up you'll really start seeing the changes:) And I will be flashing back and forth between the timeline, though not every chapter will be back and forth. Next chapter: The Vanishing of Will Byers with a very different twist.

Thank you for reading and I hoped you enjoyed!

Author's Note:

Well...I'm not sure how much I like this starting chapter, but I'm not sure if that's just because I've been staring at it too long. If you liked it, please let me know or let me know how to improve it. Thank you so much for reading!